



# Reconnecting to the Detroit River

Accomplishments of the Greater Detroit American Heritage River Initiative



Greater Detroit American  
Heritage River Initiative



Metropolitan Affairs Coalition  
Regional Solutions for Regional Issues



# The Greater Detroit American Heritage River Initiative

managed in cooperation with the Metropolitan Affairs Coalition

## What is it?

The Detroit River is one of only 14 rivers nationwide honored with a presidential designation as an **American Heritage River**. That designation led to formation of the Greater Detroit American Heritage River (AHR) Initiative, a collaborative effort of municipalities, businesses, federal and state governments, as well as civic and community-based organizations.

## What does it do?

The Greater Detroit AHR Initiative helps communities develop and implement a variety of projects to enhance economic development, improve environmental quality, and celebrate the history and culture of the Detroit River.

## How does it work?

It is a model federal/community partnership in which:

- The U. S. Department of Transportation (through the St. Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation, Federal Highway Administration, and U. S. Coast Guard) supports the services of a “River Navigator.” The Navigator is a federal employee who works closely with public officials, the local business community, and other stakeholders to implement high-priority, river-related projects.
- Metropolitan Affairs Coalition, a regional civic organization of business, labor, and government leaders, serves as project manager and facilitator.
- An Executive Committee composed of representatives of the City of Detroit, nine downriver communities, Wayne County, and the business community guides the Initiative.
- A broad-based steering committee of governmental, business, community, and environmental representatives provides advice on project activities.
- Special assistance and support are provided by the Michigan State University Extension/Michigan Sea Grant Program.
- The Greater Detroit AHR Initiative works in partnership with Canada recognizing that the Detroit River is an international boundary, a Canadian Heritage River, and home to an International Wildlife Refuge.

## What has been accomplished?

With the assistance of the Greater Detroit AHR Initiative, community partners along the Detroit River have realized many achievements. The Initiative has helped leverage more than \$13 million for projects ranging from developing riverfront greenways, to restoring and protecting wildlife habitat, remediating contaminated sites, and renovating historic structures.

### *Special Recognition*

The Greater Detroit American Heritage River Initiative and Metropolitan Affairs Coalition owe a great debt of gratitude to two people who have been instrumental to the program's success: Peter Stroh and John Hartig. Peter Stroh, former Chairman of the Stroh Companies, Inc. has provided invaluable leadership, serving as Chairman of the Initiative since its inception. For more than three years, John Hartig has tirelessly and very effectively served the Initiative as River Navigator.

In 2001, bald eagles nested, for the first time since 1904, on the U.S. side of the Detroit River



# Reconnecting to Our River

*"Take care of how you place your moccasins upon the earth. Step with care, for the faces of the future generations are looking up from the earth, waiting their turn for life."*

— Oren Lyons of the Onondaga Nation of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois)

Those words of Native American wisdom capture very well the vision and goals of the Greater Detroit AHR Initiative. The Detroit River truly is the region's most significant natural resource that deserves special care and attention.

We are literally "of the strait" — the English meaning of the French word, Detroit. But the river is more than a strait lying between Lake St. Clair and Lake Erie. It flows from our past, links us to our future, and connects us together as one of the country's great metropolitan areas. The river gave birth to metropolitan Detroit, defined us as a community, and helped produce an industrial economy that put the world on wheels.

While the river has at times been ignored and despoiled, significant efforts have and are being made to reclaim this treasured natural asset. Today, the 32-mile Detroit Riverfront is undergoing an amazing transformation. It is being rediscovered as a recreational asset, environmental resource, economic stimulus, and key ingredient in enhancing the quality of life of the Southeast Michigan area.

Up and down the river, communities and businesses are transforming the Detroit River from their "back porch" to their "front porch." Greenways are being created from Lake St. Clair to Lake Erie and up tributaries like the Rouge, Ecorse, and Huron Rivers. Waterfront redevelopment is resulting in dramatic revitalization of established communities and producing important economic benefits. And, bold projects are underway to recognize and preserve the river's tremendous heritage, as well as protect internationally significant wildlife habitat.

A key catalyst of this transformation is the Greater Detroit AHR Initiative, formed as a federal/community partnership. In the three years since its creation, AHR — with considerable support from the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Metropolitan Affairs Coalition — has worked with business and community partners in helping plan, fund, and implement a range of projects which promote economic development, expand recreational opportunities, celebrate the river's history, and rehabilitate and protect vital natural resources. This document describes the importance of this great American Heritage River to our past and future, as well as highlights recent achievements.



Depiction of a Wyandot-Iroquois peace ceremony in 1723



Bronze sculpture of a Wyandot family, located at BASF Waterfront Park in Wyandotte. The Wyandot Nation lived along the banks of the Detroit River





# Flowing from our Past — Shaping our Future



Tall ships on the Detroit River

The first human connection with the Detroit River was thousands of years ago when Native Americans plied the waters with canoes and were drawn to its banks by abundant wildlife as well as ample supplies of fish and freshwater. These first settlers were careful stewards of the river and believed that the plants, animals, fish, and water were a gift to “the People” from the Creator.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, French explorers, fur traders, and voyagers traversed the river and, in 1701, Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac landed at what he was to name Detroit. Just as the Native Americans before them, these early European settlers had a close relationship with the river through “ribbon” farms that allowed each property owner access to the riverfront and the freshwater so necessary to human, animal, and plant survival.

As Europeans settled the region, the human relationship with the river began shifting to commerce and trade. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Detroit was one of the country’s major transportation hubs and, in 1819, Congress declared the Detroit River a “public highway.” Not the least of those passengers who took advantage of this “public highway” were the 40,000 or more African Americans who escaped to freedom by crossing into Canada. By the 1890s, the Detroit River carried more passenger traffic than any other river system in the world.

With the industrial revolution, the transformation was well underway that would make Detroit the “Arsenal of Democracy” as well as the “Motor City.” Shipbuilding

became key to the local economy and at one point during the 1800s more ships were built along the Detroit River than anywhere else in the country. The shipbuilding industry provided the manufacturing technology and capacity that later served as an important catalyst for the automotive industry. In fact, the river offered Detroit a natural competitive advantage, providing the water for manufacturing processes and a convenient means for shipping raw materials, as well as the cars, trucks, and other finished products the world economy was demanding.

As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the river’s natural resources still offer the region a competitive advantage. It also presents wonderful opportunities for the Greater Detroit AHR Initiative to capitalize on a rich heritage and bright future — a future made even more promising by the work of many to reclaim the river.



The U.S. portion of *The Gateway To Freedom* monument commemorating the Underground Railroad, located on the riverfront promenade in Downtown Detroit

Bode Morin, Project Manager, Historic Fort Wayne



Civil War Reenactment at Historic Fort Wayne

# Reclaiming the River



Ducks Unlimited, Inc.

Over the years, increased human intervention and industrial/manufacturing use of the waterfront have adversely affected the Detroit River's quality. As population increased, the river was used for discharge of pollutants and assimilation of wastes. In particular, municipal and industrial waste caused substantial pollution.

For example, untreated municipal waste spawned many waterborne disease epidemics during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Oil pollution in the 1940s-1960s caused the death of large numbers of overwintering ducks and other waterfowl. Phosphorus entering from a variety of sources during the 1960s-1990s resulted in eutrophication of Lake Erie. And contamination from toxic substances became a significant problem in the 1960s.

However, these problems stimulated a collective private and public response and, over time, prevention and treatment programs have made a tremendous difference in the river's water quality. Relocation of municipal water intakes, enhanced water purification techniques, and wastewater treatment eliminated waterborne disease epidemics.

Other impressive results of pollution prevention and control programs include:

- eliminating winter duck kills caused by oil pollution,
- reducing phosphorus loading by 90 percent,
- decreasing mercury contamination of fish by 70 percent since the mercury crisis of 1970, and
- reducing PCB contamination of herring gull eggs on Fighting Island by 85 percent since the late 1970s.

Although work remains to be done, the Detroit River is well on its way to being reclaimed as a vital natural resource. Years of sustained pollution abatement efforts have enhanced water quality, nurtured a surprising comeback of fish and wildlife (e.g. bald eagle and sturgeon natural reproduction), and made the river an attraction rather than a place to avoid.



Fishing on the Detroit River

*An estimated 10 million walleye ascend the river from Lake Erie each spring to spawn. Walleye fishing alone brings in \$1 million to the economy of communities along the lower Detroit River each year.*



State Archives of Michigan

Protestors delivered oil-soaked waterfowl carcasses from the lower Detroit River to the Michigan capitol in 1948





Red Wings' Stanley Cup Victory Celebration along the Detroit River



*Economic studies have shown that for every dollar invested in greenways, three dollars in revenue is returned.*

## Our New Front Porch

Recognizing the growing attractiveness and popularity of the river, communities — with the Greater Detroit AHR Initiative's help and influence — are actively developing riverfront greenways, parks, and non-motorized transportation trails. Indeed, the vision of AHR is to eventually create a necklace of these amenities running the full length of the Detroit River, from Lake St. Clair in the north to Lake Erie in the south, as well as along major tributaries of the river.

What has been an almost continuous wall of industrial and commercial riverfront use separating people from the river is increasingly giving way to promenades, bikeways, parks, and trails that offer dramatic views of this wonderful water resource. Besides offering public access, these greenways are improving the riverfront's aesthetic appearance and often providing opportunities for enhancing wildlife habitat. They are also an important quality of life component that can help transform our gritty industrial image and make our region more competitive with other metropolitan areas in attracting new businesses, as well as workers and their families.

That lake-to-lake greenway vision is now well on the way to reality. More and more businesses and communities are showcasing the river as their new "front porch." Riverfront promenades, trails, and parks are being developed up and down the Detroit River — from the riverfront greenway at the UAW/GM Center for Human Resources, the General Motors Riverfront Promenade, and the Detroit Civic Center Promenade in the upper portion of the river to Trenton's Linked Riverfront Parks, the Elizabeth Park Riverwalk, Grosse Ile greenways and many connectors underway as part of the Downriver Linked Greenway Initiative in the downriver area.

In fact, almost 20 trails, promenades, and parks have recently been completed or are now under development. The Greater Detroit AHR Initiative has helped stimulate a true riverfront transformation that is making the Detroit River Southeast Michigan's new front porch. And importantly, this increased access to the river offered by greenways and trails provides even more opportunities to enjoy and appreciate one of this country's little known, but outstanding wildlife areas.

City of Flat Rock



Brownstown-Flat Rock-Rockwood East-West Connector provides five miles of recreational trails, and links about 25 miles of existing trails connecting over 4,800 acres of parkland to the lower Detroit River

Mark Breederland, MI Sea Grant Extension



Riverfront promenade at the UAW/GM Center for Human Resources

**Reconnecting to the Detroit River**



Michigan Department of Natural Resources

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reports that during 1995 people visited refuges more than 27.7 million times for recreation and environmental education. Their spending generated \$401.1 million in regional economies. As this spending flowed through the economy, more than 10,000 people were employed and \$162.9 million in employment income was generated.

# Leaving A Wildlife Legacy

Man's use of the Detroit waterfront has had a profound impact on the river's wildlife and natural habitats. In fact, development of the Detroit River shoreline has resulted in more than a 95 percent loss of coastal wetlands. With the Greater Detroit AHR Initiative's help, significant progress is now being made to protect the remaining habitats as well as rehabilitate degraded ones.

## Creating a Binational Conservation Vision

The Detroit River, and especially its lower reaches, is a unique and significant wildlife area with sensitive and irreplaceable natural habitats. Situated at the intersection of the Atlantic and Mississippi Flyways, the Detroit River is an important migration corridor for hundreds of fish, butterfly, raptor, neo-tropical bird, and waterfowl species.

The Detroit River and western Lake Erie contain extensive feeding and nesting habitats for waterfowl. An estimated three million ducks, geese, swans, and coots migrate annually through this region. And over 300,000 diving ducks stop each year to rest and feed on beds of wild celery in the lower Detroit River during their fall migration from Canada to the east and south.

Recognizing the critical importance of this sensitive wildlife area, the Greater Detroit AHR Initiative, in concert with Canadian and U.S. partners, developed a binational Conservation Vision for the Lower Detroit River. This vision sets forth a cooperative, coordinated international approach to enhancing and protecting a unique and valuable natural asset. It also provided the foundation and stimulus for policy makers to enact new legislation preserving these valuable and sensitive natural assets.

Essex Region Conservation Authority



Canard River Marsh, Ontario, Canada, a major resting and feeding area for migrating canvas back ducks on the Detroit River

Michigan Department of Natural Resources



Essex Region Conservation Authority



J. Poynter, National Park Service





Mud Island  
donation ceremony



David Gilkey, Detroit Free Press

*"Establishing this International Wildlife Refuge will do a lot to provide this special place with the protection that it needs. . . . I want to thank the many area businesses and groups that developed the conservation vision for the refuge."*

— President George W. Bush

## Establishing the First International Wildlife Refuge

With Congressman John Dingell's leadership, a major element of the Conservation Vision for the Lower Detroit River was realized in December 2001, when President Bush signed legislation establishing the first International Wildlife Refuge in North America. The refuge, which includes islands, coastal wetlands, marshes, shoals, and riverfront lands along 18 miles of the Lower Detroit River, will protect and restore habitat for 29 species of waterfowl, 65 kinds of fish, and 300 species of migratory birds along the Lower Detroit River in Michigan and Canada.

Business has played a special role in supporting the creation of the International Wildlife Refuge. Business leaders were directly involved in developing the binational conservation vision; this work helped spur National Steel Corporation's donation of Mud Island, in 2001, to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to become part of the refuge. Solutia helped provide the match on a North American Wetlands Conservation Act grant to purchase Calf Island in 2001. These islands contain valuable habitat for fish and wildlife.

In addition, a 44-acre former plant site owned by DaimlerChrysler Corporation and strategically located in the lower Detroit River, was acquired for the International Wildlife Refuge. DaimlerChrysler – working cooperatively with the City of Trenton, Wayne County, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Trust for Public Land, and the office of Congressman John Dingell – donated a portion of the value of the river parcel while federal funds supported the remainder of

the acquisition. This significant riverfront parcel will serve as the gateway to the International Wildlife Refuge as well as house its headquarters and visitors center.

## Promoting Soft Engineering of Shorelines

Historically, much of the Detroit River shoreline was stabilized with concrete and steel to protect developments from flooding and erosion, or to accommodate commercial navigation or industry. While often necessary for those purposes, in some cases these hardened shorelines, which provided no habitat for wildlife, have become unnecessary.

Today, with the encouragement of AHR, there is growing interest in redeveloping shorelines using "soft-engineering" techniques that offer a more hospitable natural habitat for fish, waterfowl, and other species. When appropriate, soft engineering of shorelines can cost effectively stabilize the river's shoreline, enhance habitat, reduce erosion, beautify the shoreline, and make the waterfront more accessible. To date, 11 soft engineering projects are underway along the Detroit River.



P. Ceisel, Shedd Aquarium

Natural reproduction of sturgeon was documented in the Detroit River for the first time in over 40 years



Elizabeth Park is a 162-acre Wayne County park, with more than 3,500 feet of shoreline, located on the lower Detroit River in Trenton, MI



Federal Partners of AHR



Federal Highway Administration  
Michigan Division



## Progress Through Partnerships

Partnerships and collaboration have been key to the success of the Greater Detroit AHR Initiative. AHR has spawned partnerships with federal agencies, local governments, business, and community-based groups.

### Partnering with the U.S. Department of Transportation

No better and more distinctive partnership exists than between the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) and AHR. Indeed, the Initiative could not have produced the achievements it has without DOT's leadership and support.

The arrangement is a model for effective federal/local cooperation. The St. Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation funds the salary of AHR's River Navigator, the Federal Highway Administration covers his travel expenses, and the U.S. Coast Guard provides office space. This unique partnership has delivered more than a 25:1 return on the federal investment devoted to funding the Detroit River Navigator. This represents an amazing and productive partnership that will yield benefits to the Detroit region for generations to come.

### Partnerships Reap Results

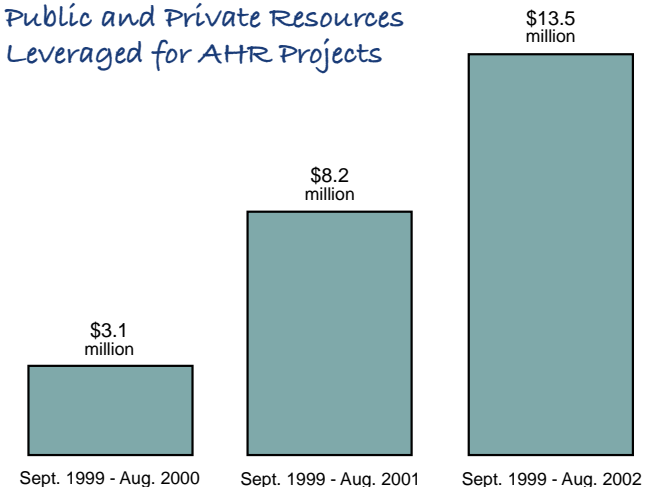
The results of AHR partnerships speak for themselves. Working with a variety of partners, the Greater Detroit AHR Initiative has helped leverage significant financial

resources and brought innumerable projects to reality. In its three years of existence, AHR helped raise over \$13 million – a truly impressive accomplishment.

As this suggests, the Greater Detroit AHR Initiative has assisted literally dozens of projects up and down the 32-mile riverfront. These include projects and activities such as helping:

- Obtain an Urban Park and Recreation Recovery Program grant to restore Flynn Pavilion on Belle Isle and reopen it as a canoe/bicycle/skating facility.
- Secure four grants totaling \$1.5 million for boardwalk improvements at Wayne County's Elizabeth Park.
- Acquire funding to restore the theater and guard house building roofs at Historic Fort Wayne.

Public and Private Resources Leveraged for AHR Projects



Soft engineering of the shoreline of Fighting Island located in the lower Detroit River



BASF Corporation

Looking out on the Detroit River from the interior of General Motors' Wintergarden



## Building Bridges to our Canadian Neighbors



The fish that swim the river's waters and the ducks, geese and gulls that make it home respect no boundaries, international or otherwise. Neither does the Greater Detroit AHR Initiative. Enhancing and protecting the Detroit River requires the vision and dedication of Canadian and American stakeholders.

That is why the Greater Detroit AHR Initiative is proud to have played a supportive role in a major Canadian achievement — designation of the Detroit River as a Canadian Heritage River. That designation took place on July 19, 2001, and made the Detroit River the only binationally designated heritage river in the world.

This international collaboration is already producing results and promises innumerable future dividends. For example, the Binational Conservation Vision for the Lower Detroit River was made possible through Canadian Heritage River and American Heritage River cooperation. And organizing the State of the Strait Conference held in Windsor, Ontario permitted Canadian and U.S. officials to discuss and better understand the ecological challenges facing the river as well as develop common solutions.



BASF Corporation

Ecological rehabilitation underway on Hennepin Point located on the upstream end of Grosse Ile

## Navigating with Business Leadership

A substantial reason for AHR's success in Detroit is the close connection it has established with the business community. In fact, Peter Stroh, former Chairman of the Stroh Companies, led the effort to have the Detroit River designated an American Heritage River and furthered his involvement by chairing the Greater Detroit AHR Executive Committee.

Also, Metropolitan Affairs Coalition, a regional civic organization funded by business and labor, adopted the Initiative as one of its main projects. This provided AHR with immediate organizational capacity and the private sector support necessary to embark on an aggressive slate of project activities.

Moreover, under Mr. Stroh's leadership a group of businesses and industry was formed that have a riverfront presence. In addition to the Stroh Companies, this includes such members as General Motors Corporation, Ford Motor Company, DaimlerChrysler Corporation, BASF Corporation, National Steel Corporation, Solutia Inc., Nicholson Terminal and Dock, Detroit Free Press, DTE Energy, UAW/GM Center for Human Resources, and others. It meets quarterly to discuss common concerns and share information about projects underway affecting the river. In fact, discussions of this group led National Steel Corporation to donate Mud Island to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.



Walkers and fishermen  
enjoy the City of  
Ecorse's Dingell Park  
overlooking Mud Island



## Renewing Respect for Our River

In a very real sense we are reconnecting to the Detroit River and returning to an appreciation of, and care for, this vital resource that Native Americans so well demonstrated. Native Americans were and remain prudent caretakers of the land, wildlife, and water resources, maintaining a delicate balance with nature.

The Greater Detroit AHR Initiative is proud to be part of stimulating this renewed respect and appreciation for our great river. It is certain to benefit our children and grandchildren as we reconnect to a river that shaped our past and continues to guide our future.

For further information and a comprehensive list of projects of the Greater Detroit American Heritage River Initiative projects, please see [www.tellusnews.com/ahr](http://www.tellusnews.com/ahr).

Information about the American Heritage Rivers Initiative can be located at [www.epa.gov/rivers/](http://www.epa.gov/rivers/).



Essex Region Conservation Authority



National Park Service  
Don Breneman



P. Celsel, Shedd Aquarium



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MAC is a public/  
private partnership  
of business, labor  
and governmental  
leaders that  
facilitates solutions  
to regional issues  
affecting the  
economic vitality  
and quality of life in  
Southeast Michigan.



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Greater Detroit  
American Heritage  
River Initiative



MAC

Business  
Labor  
Government

## Greater Detroit American Heritage River Vision Statement

“We are filled with pride for our magnificent river and have a shared vision for its regeneration. Our vibrant international waterway inspires a community brimming with fun and excitement, rest and relaxation. A broad diversity of jobs, housing, historic interpretation, recreation, and culture breathe life into a 24-hour-a-day waterfront. Industry, commerce, and tourism growing in harmony with the environment sustain fish, birds, animal, and plant habitats. The river has become the region’s front door with access to all inland communities. Its beauty and integrity have been restored, and we thrive within its ecosystem.”